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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SAAKASHVILI TAKES HIS CASE PUBLIC, MAKES HISTORY

REF: TBILISI 2219

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (U) Begin Summary: In an unprecedented development in modern Georgian history, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili voluntarily testified on November 28 in front of Parliament's "Ad Hoc Commission Investigating the August events and Russia's invasion." The country watched on live TV as the President sat before the Commission for nearly five hours, first reading a prepared statement and then answering the questions of the commissioners. The Ambassador and diplomatic corps attended the testimony at Parliament. Saakashvili did not defer any questions to a closed session and admitted readily that he had made the decision for Georgian ground forces to enter South Ossetia in order to protect Georgian citizens. Saakashvili defended the decision as "inevitable," because Russian troops were advancing into South Ossetia and Georgian-controlled villages were being heavily shelled. Saakashvili claimed repeated attempts to speak with Russia's leaders and stop hostilities were rebuffed, and that he and the government were left no choice but to try and defend Georgia's citizens and sovereignty by force. He said the combat decision was his and his government's, and was not taken in consultation with any other country. Saakashvili argued that any responsible democratic government in Georgia would have reached the same decision. He said Georgia was neither a loser nor a winner in the war, as the struggle continues. However, he said the invasion demonstrated once and for all that Russia could not be considered a "peacekeeper" in Georgia. An unofficial transcript of Saakashvili's testimony is on-line at (www.civil.ge). Saakashvili was the Commission's final witness and the Commission expects to issue its report and recommendations within 10 days. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: This Commission is an unprecedented development in modern Georgian history. Commission Chairman Paata Davitaia told us that his commission is the first in the former Soviet Union before which a head of state has testified. Saakashvili voluntarily chose to appear before the Commission and readily addressed all questions; during his testimony, he reiterated his willingness to testify further before Parliament. Saakashvili maintained his position, which has remained consistent since the August war, that he and his Government made the decision to use force only as a last resort. He has openly acknowledged the orders he gave and has presented his justification for them to the Parliament, his country, and the world. While the Commission's work has been met with some skepticism by some in the Georgian opposition and among Tbilisi's elite, and even though it does not have formal powers to recommend or order changes in government policy, many of our interlocutors believe it is an important step in Georgia's democratic development. We agree. End comment.

COMMITTEE, TESTIMONY IS UNPRECEDENTED

¶13. (U) Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili testified on November 28 in front of Parliament's ad hoc Commission Investigating the August events and Russia's Invasion (Hereafter referred to as the Commission). The President sat before the Commission for nearly five hours, the entirety of which was broadcast live on TV throughout the country. The Ambassador and diplomatic corps attended the first part of the testimony at Parliament, in a chamber equipped with simultaneous translation. Saakashvili did not defer any questions to a closed session, as some members of his national security team had done during earlier testimony.

DEMOCRACY IS RESPONSE TO AGGRESSION

¶14. (U) Before addressing the Commission members' questions, Saakashvili gave a brief statement. He noted that the Commission itself was an historic development for Georgia, that it was being led by an opposition member (Davitaia) who less than a year ago was calling for his (Saakashvili's) resignation (reftel). He said this was a further example that "democracy is this government's response to aggression." The President had ordered all members of his government to cooperate with the Commission, and they had done so. He said the commission had heard many versions of the events of August.

YES, WE ORDERED MILITARY DEFENSE

¶15. (U) The President admitted readily that he had made the decision for Georgian ground forces to enter South Ossetia, but he denied Russia's allegation that the GOG's goal was to regain control over Tskhinvali. Rather, Saakashvili said the

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decision was "inevitable," because Russian troops were advancing into South Ossetia and Georgian-controlled villages were being heavily shelled. Saakashvili said any democratic government in Georgia would have reached the same decision under those circumstances in order to save Georgians in Tskhinvali and surrounding villages. He stressed that not one Georgian soldier had entered another country, while tens of thousands of Russians entered sovereign Georgian territory.

OUR DECISION ALONE

¶16. (U) Saakashvili said the order for Georgian forces to engage Russian and Ossetian troops in combat was his and his government's alone. The decision was not taken in consultation with any other country. Saakashvili said he tried to contact Russian President Medvedev and Russian MFA envoy Yuri Popov to stop the escalation and invasion on August 7, but his calls were refused. He said he then called the Polish and Lithuanian Presidents, and the NATO Secretary General. He said as far as he knew Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili was in contact with U.S. State Department officials.

RUSSIA IS AGGRESSOR

¶17. (U) The President said Georgia was neither a loser nor a winner in the war. Rather, he said the struggle continues today, as Russian troops are digging in, fewer than 30 miles from Tbilisi. Now, said Saakashvili, the rest of the world can no longer ignore Russia's true colors as an aggressor and occupier, and the invasion demonstrated once and for all that Russia could not be considered a "peacekeeper."

KITSMARISHVILI "A MISTAKE"

¶18. (C) Saakashvili also denounced former Ambassador to Russia Kitsmarishvili's earlier allegations against him and his administration. Kitsmarishvili had alleged before the Commission (reftel) that Saakashvili received a "green light" from the USG to take Tskhinvali by force of arms. Saakashvili said this was not true, that Kitsmarishvili was

not present at any policy decisions, and that he had had no real influence since even before he was recalled from Moscow.

The President said it had been a "mistake" to appoint Kitsmarishvili as Ambassador. (Note: Upon leaving the observation room, the press asked the Ambassador about Kitsmarishvili's "green light" allegations. The Ambassador said unequivocally, "There was no green light." End note.)

¶9. (C) In a separate meeting with Davitaia on December 1, Davitaia told the Ambassador that Kitsmarishvili's testimony was intentionally provocative in order to grab headlines for himself. Davitaia told the Ambassador that he had received copies of Kitmarishvili's cables from Moscow, in which essentially no substance was reported. Davitaia believed that Kitsmarishvili spent much of his short time in Moscow enhancing his own business interests with representatives from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

REPORT DUE IN 10 DAYS, NEXT STEPS

¶10. (C) Davitaia told the Ambassador that the Commission hopes to issue its report within 10 days. Davitaia said the report will include assessments of what happened, how the government responded, and recommendations about what structural and process improvements the government can put in place to better respond to future crises. Davitaia has based much of his commission's structure and approach on the USG 9/11 Commission. Davitaia is interested in further understanding how the results of his Commission can be used to strengthen the government of Georgia for the future.

TEFFT